

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 1

Article 17

1980

Turner, Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography

Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Benjamin Franklin IV (1980) "Turner, Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol1/iss1/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Arlin Turner. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography*. New York and Oxford [England]: Oxford U. Press, 1980, xiii + 457pp. \$20.00

The capstone to near half a century's career in Hawthorne studies, this book will long keep memorable the name of Arlin Turner. Randall Stewart's biography is surpassed because of Turner's access to additional documents and a wealth of critical commentary, the results of which are but too obvious. Turner's account strikes a deft balance of Hawthorne's life with his literary career — the latter never widely separated from the former — that is informative, critically perceptive, and eminently readable. Such criteria bear out Turner's comment in the "Acknowledgments" that "responsible literary research and effective writing seem to be goals worth pursuing."

The "rich variety of Hawthorne's personality and the individuality and complexity of his thought" come alive in these pages, from the ardent lover and husband that he was to Sophia, through the writer of densely textured tales and novels, to the acquaintance of Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville. Turner's treatment of these relationships is good at defining and suggesting. The Hawthorne-Melville situation, of course, takes first place, but the more terse sections concerning Hawthorne's qualified admiration for Thoreau and his view of Emerson as not so wonderful are illuminating. So is that concerning Poe, much more admired as a fictionist than as a critic in Hawthorne's opinion. Hawthorne, after all, was human, and his varied attitudes crop up elsewhere, for example in his life among such persons as Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, his formidable sister-in-law, or in that among his custom-house or consular duties.

In Turner's estimate, Hawthorne's works form a complex whole, in which the writer draws upon American experience as he senses it. The truth of this theory is borne out in that Hawthorne's first writings, *Fanshawe* (1828), the projected "Seven Tales of My Native Land" and "The Story Teller," as well as the historical sketches, center in American types and themes — with domestication of the Gothic in the fiction. So do the abortive romances of his last years, with their mingling of American claimants to European ancestry, grandeur, and guilt. Let us remember, too, that *The Scarlet Letter* shares the lime-

light with *Moby-Dick* as the greatest American Gothic novel in the nineteenth century. Much of Hawthorne's best work delved into the American past and its effects upon the present. "Alice Doane's Appeal," "The Gray Champion," and "Young Goodman Brown" (probably Hawthorne's greatest tale) suggest a once-upon-a-time aura, although they are far different from children's stories. Hawthorne's ceaseless fascination with probing the human mind, particularly into its darker, irrational regions, is a legacy from his Puritan forebears, but he modifies that legacy into subtle psychological substance in fiction. "The Haunted Mind," "Fancy's Show-Box," and "Ethan Brand" are in this respect great advances upon "Alice Doane's Appeal," itself nonetheless a haunting tale.

Chapter 17 outlines the day-to-day circumstances underlying composition of *The Scarlet Letter*, and it may be considered representative of the matured Hawthorne as man and as writer. The death of his mother agitated him, as did the need for money, so he turned feverishly to writing. After the publication of the novel he was ready to leave Salem. Like other "classics" of American fiction (*Moby-Dick* or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), this book was begun as something different — a collection of tales — from what appeared in final form. That it has antecedents in Hawthorne's earlier tales, Turner makes clear, just as he clarifies its American elements. The notion of concealed sin, the series of ironic reversals in human circumstances and responses, the psychological turn given to seventeenth-century morality and theology: all were wrought and unified by a practiced hand. The central concerns of the novel were integral parts of Hawthorne's vision, and as such the romance context allows for indulgence of his genuine visionary frame of mind.

Overall, Turner has created fine literary biography in *Nathaniel Hawthorne*. The man and his thought are presented in detail, a detail unmarred by any axe-grinding. The biographer sees his subject steadily and whole, and he knows how to proportion his material. If the passages of analytical criticism are terse, that feature results from no single literary method's being given preeminence. Readers consequently must build upon Turner's thinking with their own, a procedure he advocates in the "Preface." This biography will be required reading for anyone with serious interests in Hawthorne and his writing. The book is the work of the scholar most capable of doing it, and Turner's *Nathaniel Hawthorne* will be the standard life for years to come.

Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV

The University of Mississippi